

900 years ago

Sermon for 10th May 2009: A story celebrating 900 years of worship in the Diocese, as part of a weekend of story-telling at St Andrew's.

Easter 5

Acts 8:26-40

John 15: 1-8

What follows is a made-up story, compiled from my imagination and these sources:

- A history and guide to the parish church of St Andrew, Chesterton, Cambridge, PCC: 2nd Edition 1990
- Whitock, M. Life in the middle ages: scenes from the town and countryside of medieval England

With apologies to historians, Alasdair Coles

This is an account laid down by Matthew Catfish, freemen of the vill of Chesterton, May 1109.

As I am 42 and an old man, and for sure not long more to live, now I declare this story of the miracle of the birth of my son, John.

Understand first that once I was the poorest freemen in this vill, tied to the King's lands. But with some pennies I came by, I rented myself a fish stall in nearby Cambridge town some years back and made good earnings. Soon I could rent 8 pieces of land, which gave me enough to rent out one strip of land. After eight good summer crops, I bought myself a piece and then a strip with a hedge. I dug a ditch and soon, I could buy a house. God be praised.

This town of Cambridge, is a stinking place of nearly two thousand. It is full of cheats and offal and dung from the horses and the Danes that have "sprung up in this island like poisonous weeds among the wheat". Once the Danes came in Dragon-boats and destroyed everything hereabouts; now they drink and steal our women. At least they speak English, which is more than the Norman kings can. But I don't complain: the Normans and the Danes are good for making money from. And, if my scales have not always been the fairest, that is their look-out.

Having made a vat of money, I looked out a wife and found a honest soul called Sarah who was 15. We were married in her house and later blest by our old Saxon priest here, on the steps of the South porch of this new Norman church. The priest told me that a married woman is a "sort of infant" and I am to watch her scolding, but she has turned out gentle. But, by one year, she had no children, so at Michaelmas, we travelled two days to St Edmunds' church for her to touch the white bull, to come by a child, on honour of St Michael: "glorious king, virgin and martyr".

She fell pregnant, sure enough, with a girl whom we called Anna, after the mother of the blessed St Ethelreda, wife of Egrith. But she was sickly and died, but the wiley priest

baptised her quick enough and she was saved the purgatory of the unbaptised. And Sarah suffered.

Then a scrawny Dane accused me of a scive and there was trouble. But I saved my skin by claiming the benefit of the clergy. I know little Holy Scripture, but this I learnt young, to save my neck: by saying the Psalm [Psalm 51:5]: “have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love, according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions”. I was fined and my stall was taken away and things went badly for us.

The priest told us we had no sons because we were wanting in praying, He should know for he has many sons of his own; even though Archbishop Anslem, who was always fretting with the church, said our clergy should not be wed. This Archbishop, whom everyone said was very clever but incomprehensible, now he is dead just a week gone by. He was a crafty Italian who did not trust the Saxons: all his Bishops were Norman of course, including the new Bishop of Ely, called Henry from Breton.

So we came to Mass during the week, as well as Sunday and we wore out our knees and spent a fortune on candles. But Sarah still was barren of sons.

So we sought the favours of Our Lady, who comes to the village of Walsingham. It took four days by cart, and we gave money to the priests and the monks, and asked Our Lady for the good fortune of a son. But She was silent and no son came.

So we watched the skys for portents and signs. Nine years ago, there had been “many sinister occurrences; among others, this was the most terrifying, that the Devil visibly appeared to men in woods and byways, and spoke to passers by. Besides which, in the village of Hampstead in Berkshire for fifteen days on end a spring ran blood so abundantly that a nearby pool was stained with it. The king heard of these things and laughed caring nothing about himself of what other people saw.” That was the year King William died.

Then the sign came. One Sunday, we stood as usual in church, and watched the dance of the priests and deacons muttering Latin. The deacon came among us surrounded by candles and read the Gospel. And, though I could not understand, I felt the words gather above my head.

At the Eucharist, the sun shone brightly on the enamel and brass and copper. And, as I watched the priest drinking the blood of Christ, the words cackled about me like rooks . I needed no Phillip

And then we eat our Saviour’s flesh. And the choir sings. The women wail. And I saw our Lord smile and the words took form and He said

every branch that does bear fruit I prune so that it will be even more fruitful

And now I understood our Lord’s will. For these have been the pruning years and to come was fruitfulness.

So Sarah gave birth to my son, John, before she died of a fever at a good age: she was 26. She had been a blessing and I got her buried with a good Mass in the South graveyard. And I have paid the priests to say the Mass, to release her from purgatory.

And, for all these good things, I give thanks to our Lord, our Saviour, and Our lady.